

Gender, Gesture and Simultaneous Speech – A Multi-Modal investigation

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How are different modes of communication combined and co-ordinated by speakers and listeners to generate meaning in face-to-face interaction? This question was addressed in a recent case study, which compared the patterns of multi-modal interaction between Australian adolescent girls and boys in two single gender groups. The focus of the investigation was overlapping speech during informal conversation between friends, in a social setting. The communicative modes observed were speech, posture, head movement, gaze, gesture, proxemics, and layout. The results revealed interesting similarities and differences in how and when communicative modes were combined and co-ordinated by speakers and listeners in the two groups.

This presentation will focus on the way in which two of these communicative modes, speech and gesture, were combined by participants in each of the groups to generate meaning and achieve social/communicative objectives.

Gesture was understood, for the purposes of this study, to refer to arm and hand movement that occur with speech during face-to-face interaction.

Key findings regarding gesture were that gesture frequency at simultaneous speech was the same for boys and girls, but the type of gestures and their pragmatic uses differed between the two groups: the boys most commonly used deictic (ie pointing) gesture whereas the girls favoured metaphoric (ie representative) gesture; at the same time, the boys' gestures most often accompanied questions, whereas the girls' gestures accompanied positive comments. Finally, speech and gesture synchronised to form a clear communicative unit, for both groups. When utterances were repeated, the accompanying gesture was also repeated. When utterances were repeated with the utterance partly changed, the gesture accompanying the changed words was also changed.